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ABSTRACT

Traditionally the sex ratio has been the domain of demographers and social biologists. This study takes the societal phenomenon of sex ratio imbalance as context, but focuses on the social psychological impact of perceived mate availability. One-half the contents of the 1989 Southern California Social Survey was devoted to the issue of mate availability and its attitudinal and psychological correlates. Subjects (N=1,116) were adults, with Blacks and Latinos oversampled. Two indicators of perceived mate availability were ascertained: availability of opposite sex and sex ratio. The results indicated that each of the groups could be classified in terms of perceived opposite sex availability: Black women were in a situation of severe undersupply; Black men in great oversupply; Latino women in relative undersupply; Latino and White men in relative balance. For most groups the perception was a relative reflection of the actual situation. The White female situation was a bit more ambiguous. In terms of actual sex ratio, White women were far more advantaged than Black women, but perceived their situation to be one of male shortage. The root of this perception may be more reflective of gender role issues than structural conditions. (ABL)

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Perceived mate availability and marital/familial values: A cross-cultural analysis

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Basic Conceptualizations

Our research program takes the societal phenomenon of sex ratio imbalance as context, but focuses on the social psychological impact of perceived mate availability. We view marital opportunity as the social meaning of sex ratio and incorporate the concept of perceived mate availability as the central indicator of marital opportunity (Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, in press). As we have indicated in earlier work, however, the concept of mate availability goes beyond the simple existence of "warm bodies" and includes notions of desirability, eligibility, and social constraints (e.g., racial boundaries). For example, the theoretical formulations of Darity and Myers (1984, 1986/87) and Wilson and Neckerman (1986) suggest that the lack of economic wherewithal of significant segments of the black male population has resulted in constrained marital opportunities for black women. Our own analysis of marital behavior using data from the National Survey of Black Americans provides support for these notions (Tucker & Taylor, 1989).

Method

Sample

Half the contents of the 1989 Southern California Social Survey (SCSS) was devoted to the issue of mate availability and its attitudinal and psychological correlates by virtue of the secondary author's role as the 1989 SCSS Principal Investigator. Conducted in February and March, the sample consisted of 1,116 adult (age 18 and over) residents of Los Angeles, Ventura and Orange counties. Blacks and Latinos were oversampled by a factor of 13 to 1, in order to provide numbers of numbers sufficient for analytical purposes. Although 5% of the sample was of Asian origin and another 3.6% represented "other" ethnic/racial groups or combinations of groups, the present analyses are focused only on Blacks, Whites, and Latinos. Two-thirds of the Latino sample were Mexican-American, with the remaining primarily of Central or South American ancestry. Demographic characteristics of the sample, including sex ratios, are listed in Table 1.

groups, controlling for age, income and education (see Table 2). The results show remarkable similarity across groups on values, with the greatest differences evident in the importance of religion for a successful marriage (with the Latino sample valuing religion similarity most highly and whites valuing it least); the importance of children for a successful marriage (evidencing the same ethnic pattern as did the religion item); and the importance of adequate income for marital success (with Blacks placing greatest emphasis on income and Whites having the least concern).

For each gender by ethnic group combination separately, Table 3 presents the results of partial correlations between mate availability indicators and marital values, controlling again for age, income, and education. For all groups, marital expectation is directly associated with beliefs about the importance of marriage, and in most cases, beliefs about the importance of long-term relationships as well. For most groups, the expectation of marriage is also correlated with valuing the romantic aspects of marriage (i.e., love, commitment, fidelity).

For all other availability indicators, the pattern of associations is much more complex. Among African American women and Latinas, *greater difficulty* in finding dates was associated with *greater* value placed on marriage. Among Black women only, greater difficulty in finding dates was also associated with greater importance attributed to practical factors in marriage. Also among Black women, the perception of a low sex ratio was related to greater emphasis on background factors in marriage, but less value placed on long term-relationships.

Among Latinas only, greater difficulty finding dates was also associated with a greater emphasis on romantic factors in marriage, while the perception of fewer available men was associated with a greater emphasis on the practical aspects of marriage (in particular the importance of income in marriage). Also for Latinas, male shortage as indicated by both availability measures (availability of opposite sex and perceived sex ratio) were associated with *greater* importance placed on being married when you have children.

discussed the relationship between "actual" sex ratios for these groups and perceived sex ratio. While for most groups, the perception is a relative reflection of the actual situation; Latina perceptions of mate unavailability seems related to the fact that Latino men--although numerous--are economically disadvantaged and therefore not judged as viable marriage partners (Tucker & Mitchell-Kernan, 1989). The White female situation is a bit more ambiguous. In terms of "actual sex ratio," (considering the preponderance of women over aged 65 in the White sample and the fact that they skew the overall sex ratio), they are far more advantaged than Black women, but perceive their situation to be one of "male shortage." The root of this perception may be more reflective of gender role issues than structural conditions, such as those confronting Black women and Latinas.

A condition of undersupply that reflects a reality (i.e., for Black women and Latinas) permits those in the situation to attribute their lack of potential mates to external forces (as opposed to internal failings). The scarce resource of marriage is therefore more highly valued (because it is harder to get for reasons unrelated to personal shortcomings). For persons for whom a considerable oversupply exists (i.e., Black men), the lack of potential mates can only be internally attributed (for who could fail to find a mate in such a situation). In order to protect the ego, such persons must *devalue* romantic relationships and the institution of marriage. In situations of balance, there should be little or no association between mate availability considerations and marriage and family values (as is the case with White men and women and Latino men).

On one hand these findings appear to contradict the Guttentag and Secord (1983) assumption about the relationship between marital values and sex ratios in societies--that male shortage leads to a devaluing of marriage and family. On the other hand, it may simply be that societal and individual phenomena in relation to sex ratio are distinct. In these times (at the end of a nation-wide period of relative male shortage), American society is placing much less emphasis on the institution of marriage. Yet these results demonstrate a high regard for marriage across ethnic groups, and that the value does vary as a function

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Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Sample by Ethnicity and Gender

	Blacks		Whites		Latinos	
L.A. Co. Sex Ratio (1980 Census)	85.6		91.9		98.8	
L.A.-Long Beach SMSA Sex Ratio (1980 Census)	83.5		92.8		97.8	
	M	F	M	F	M	F
Perceived Mate Availability (%)						
Not enough	15.4	69.4	20.0	59.0	14.1	54.3
Enough	26.4	20.0	38.5	32.5	46.5	32.6
More than enough	58.2	10.6	41.5	8.5	39.4	13.0
Sample size	94	176	218	229	102	100
Age (%)						
18-29	41.3	30.8	30.3	21.6	63.7	42.0
30-49	33.7	39.6	38.1	44.1	29.4	40.0
50-64	15.2	18.3	20.6	15.4	5.9	9.0
65+	9.8	11.2	11.0	18.9	2.9	9.0
Population Distribution for persons over aged 19 from 1980 Census: L.A. Long Beach SMSA (%)						
20-29	30.1	30.9	26.8	24.3	41.1	37.5
30-39	41.7	39.5	36.8	33.9	40.1	40.2
50-64	18.7	18.3	23.4	23.3	13.3	15.0
65+	8.8	11.4	13.0	18.4	5.0	7.4
Neighborhood Income Level (%)						
Poor	5.4	15.1	1.9	1.3	2.0	11.3
Working class	48.4	54.1	32.7	22.0	58.4	53.6
Middle class	37.6	26.7	38.8	41.6	34.7	33.0
Upper middle class	12.5	4.1	23.8	27.9	5.0	2.1
Wealthy	0.0	0.0	2.8	2.2	0.0	0.0

11. Importance of adequate income for successful marriage

8.70	8.22	7.96	.18

12. Importance of good sex for successful marriage

8.80	8.94	8.62	.11

13. Importance of being good friends for successful marriage

9.56	9.68	9.59	.04

14. Importance of having children

8.22	8.57	7.76	.11

15. Importance of being married when you have children[1]

8.50	8.50	8.44	.01

*All value scores are based on 10 point scales, with 1 being "not very important at all" and 10 being "extremely important"

[1]Asked only of childless respondents.

	Marital Expectation	Ease of Finding Dates	Avail. of Opposite Sex	Sex Ratio
Importance of practical factors in marriage	.11	.05	-.24*	-.02
Importance of income in marriage	.03	.01	-.26*	-.06
Importance of having children	-.02	-.02	-.00	.07
Importance of being married when you have children	.09	-.14	-.25*	-.35**
III. WHITES				
Importance of long-term relationship	.47***	-.06	-.05	.03
Importance of marriage	.46***	.23**	-.03	.03
Importance of romantic factors in marriage	.16*	-.04	.00	-.01
Importance of background factors in marriage	-.02	.02	-.07	.01
Importance of practical factors in marriage	.19*	-.00	-.10	-.06
Importance of income in marriage	.18*	.06	-.07	-.07
Importance of having children	.27**	.03	.02	.09
Importance of being married when you have children	.04	-.07	-.13	-.23**

***p<.001; **p<.01; *p<.05; +p<.10.

	Marital Expectation	Ease of Finding Dates	Avail. of Opposite Sex	Sex Ratio
Importance of practical factors in marriage	.28*	-.09	-.07	.18*
Importance of income in marriage	.06	-.07	-.02	.14+
Importance of having children	.18+	.22*	.03	.07
Importance of being married when you have children	-.07	-.12	.21+	-.08
III. WHITES				
Importance of long-term relationship	.65***	.06	-.01	-.05
Importance of marriage	.68***	.11	.04	-.08
Importance of romantic factors in marriage	.27**	-.11	.00	-.01
Importance of background factors in marriage	.01	-.03	-.00	.04
Importance of practical factors in marriage	.09	.06	-.06	-.01
Importance of income in marriage	.11	.00	-.13	.00
Importance of having children	.49**	.07	.04	-.04
Importance of being married when you have children	-.24	-.01	.06	.22*

***p<.001; **p<.01; *p<.05; +p<.10.

Mate Availability

C13. Now I would like you to tell me what your current dating situation is like. On a scale of 1 to 10, please tell me how easy is it for you to find dates who meet your standards these days. 10 means that you have a very easy time finding suitable dates and 1 means you have an extremely difficult time finding suitable dates.

D1. For women/men like yourself, that is, women/men about your age with a similar educational and social background, would you say that there are:

a. **not enough** men/women
b. **enough** men/women
c. **more than enough** men/women

D2. Again, for women/men like yourself--about your age with a similar educational and social background--how many men do you think there are for every ten women? _____

Income/Economic Level

What kind of people mainly ive in your neighborhood? Would you say...1) mostly very poor, 2) mostly working class, 3) mostly middle class, 4) mostly upper middle class, or 5) mostly wealthy people?